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Draft report of the Committee on Information

III. General debate and consideration of substantive questions

1. Statements during the general debate were made by the following States members of the Committee: Algeria, Argentina, Bangladesh, Belarus, Brazil, China, Costa Rica, Cuba, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Egypt, Ghana, Guyana, Indonesia (on behalf of the Group of 77 and China), Iran (Islamic Republic of), Japan, Jamaica (on behalf of the States members of the Caribbean Community), Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Nepal, Netherlands (on behalf of the Western European and Other States Group), Pakistan, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (on behalf of the European Union and associated countries), United Republic of Tanzania, United States of America, Uruguay and Viet Nam.

2. Statements were also made by the observers of Haiti, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya and Solomon Islands. The Assistant Director-General for Communication, Information and Informatics of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) addressed the Committee, as did the President of the United Nations Correspondents' Association.

3. In taking up the substantive questions before the Committee, all speakers expressed their sincere dedication to the principles of freedom of the press and freedom of information, which were fundamental freedoms indispensable to democracy and development. They appreciated the important commemoration of World Press Freedom Day on 4 May 1998, which had been organized by the Department of Public Information, in cooperation with UNESCO, the United Nations Correspondents' Association and the World Press Freedom Committee. A number of delegations noted that it was especially meaningful to hold such an event during the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Many speakers emphasized the importance of article 19 of the Declaration, which embodied the commitment of the international community to the right to freedom of information and expression. One delegation spoke of a famous journalist killed by extremists in his country, but he said that hundreds of other journalists refused to give up the struggle to pursue their profession. All delegations paid tribute to the dedicated journalists throughout the world who performed their duties in the face of daily threats and harassment. One delegation pointed to its dedication to implementing the Alma Ata Declaration on Promoting Independent and Pluralistic Media in Asia, adopted in 1992 at a seminar organized by Kazakhstan in cooperation with the United Nations and UNESCO. The UNESCO representative informed the Committee that the World Press Freedom Prize was given by UNESCO to a jailed journalist and also referred to the imprisonment of a member of the jury for the Prize.

4. Several speakers recalled the phrase "global village" in describing the world on the threshold of the twenty-first century. Technological achievements in the field of

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information had obliterated the "constraints of time and space within and between nations", in the words of one speaker. It was of great importance to a number of speakers that the United Nations took action to ensure that developing countries, with the appropriate assistance, could benefit fully from the informatics revolution in meeting the challenges of economic and social development. One speaker, addressing the Committee on behalf of a large group, as well as a number of other speakers, reiterated that they attached the highest priority to the realization of the establishment of new, more just and effective global information and communication practices, based on a free and balanced flow of information, in a world where disparities in technological advances and the gap between the developed and developing countries were widening. It was critical in their view that the gains of the technological revolution in the field of information were made accessible to the developing countries or, in the words of one speaker, the global village would be little more than a "country club". In the words of another delegation speaking on behalf of a large group, there was a need to establish a balance in the dissemination of information, to ensure a diversification of information sources and to attain a mutually beneficial partnership in the information sector. In his view, the principles of the Charter of the United Nations should be upheld in that public information should be made available to all humankind and not be left to the media of a few developed nations. One delegation said that the United Nations must act urgently to end the "colonialism of information" and to establish a more balanced flow of information that neither distorted nor manipulated the realities of developing countries. Concern was expressed by some delegations that news from developing countries did not receive adequate media coverage. One speaker, addressing the Committee on behalf of a large group, acknowledged UNESCO's important work in cooperating with news agencies and broadcasting organizations in developing countries to disseminate information on priority issues.

5. In addressing the public information policies and activities of the United Nations, a number of delegations observed that the role of the Committee on Information in the effort to reform the Organization in the key area of information and communications had diminished. As one speaker put it, the Committee was "off to one side". Members generally agreed that it was now time for the Committee to make a significant contribution in assisting the Secretary-General to reshape the key area of public information on the eve of a new century. As one delegate put it, it was time "to rethink the past and prepare for the future".

6. A number of speakers addressed the subject of the working methods of the Committee, in the belief that a new mechanism was required to help the Committee negotiate, as well as to impart a new dynamic. One delegation, speaking on behalf of a large group, said that this mechanism should be open-ended, transparent and inclusive, and a number of other speakers supported the creation of an open-ended working group. Many speakers spoke of the need for consensus to prevail in the work of the Committee, although one delegation was of the view that while consensus was important, change might be required to keep up with the winds of reform in the Organization.

7. All speakers welcomed Mr. Kensaku Hogen as head of the Department of Public Information and pointed to the fact that his appointment at the level of Under-Secretary-General signified the importance attached to placing the information and communications function at the heart of the strategic management of the Organization and to developing a culture of communication. Tribute was paid to Mr. Samir Sanbar for his invaluable contributions and untiring efforts in the sphere of public information as former head of the Department.

8. The majority of delegations voiced their support for the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the measures regarding information and communications and agreed that it would serve as a very useful basis for the Committee's deliberations. Several delegations also referred to the earlier report of the Task Force on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities, the thrust of which the Secretary-General had concurred with. Speakers maintained that the Department of Public Information, as the focal point of the Organization for information and communications, should be strengthened to fulfil the expectations of its Member States and their peoples around the world. A great many delegations supported the broad objectives of the new orientation for the field of information, as contained in the report of the Secretary-General. Many also believed that, in elaborating and implementing the reform proposals for the reorientation of the Department, the Secretary-General should fully take into account the views of Member States. All agreed that the United Nations should be projected as an open, transparent and public institution and concurred with the view that communications was not a support function, but rather an integral part of the substantive programme of the Organization. Accordingly, one delegation, speaking on behalf of a large group, and other speakers encouraged the involvement of the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information in the Secretariat's decision-making processes at the strategic level, in the belief

that he had an extremely important role to play as principal strategist for United Nations communications policies. Many speakers expressed support for the plan to institute a strategic planning group within his office to execute an integrated programme for communications and hoped that this group would consider the views of Member States and keep them informed. Another delegation made the point that "strategic guidelines implied choices", and that, in this context, it was essential for the Department of Public Information to follow General Assembly-mandated activities. Several delegations said that they wished to see the Department attach importance to ensuring impartiality and objectivity in United Nations information activities.

9. Many speakers agreed that it was important that the unified message of the United Nations must be supportive of the developing countries and of development in general. In the words of one speaker, the United Nations should "convey the voice of the voiceless" to the whole world in an objective manner. One speaker was of the view that the role of information should be strengthened to stimulate development assistance worldwide. It was agreed by a number of delegations that information also had a vital role to play in the promotion of world peace.

10. Many speakers believed that in order to complete the tasks ahead of it, the Department would need to be provided with sufficient resources. They praised the Department of Public Information for having utilized all means of communications to disseminate its materials and pointed to negative consequences on the Department's information activities owing to reduced resources allocated to it in the 1998-1999 budget. One speaker did not favour "an arbitrary percentage reduction of the Department of Public Information's budget" and was of the opinion that each activity should be reviewed regularly on the basis of its relevance, usefulness and effectiveness. Many feared any further reduction could adversely affect the capacity of the Department to fulfil its comprehensive mandates and responsibilities and stressed that mandated information activities must be implemented. They underscored that any change in these mandated activities must be approved by Member States. One speaker was of the view that it would be inadvisable to resort to private contributions to meet financial shortages, as it could affect the priorities established by Member States. Another delegate quoted a statement by the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations to the effect that reform was more than mere streamlining of structures, looking at posts or dealing with budgets, but rather "it was ensuring that the United Nations was relevant and equipped to deal with present and future challenges in the world".

11. A delegation, speaking on behalf of a large group, in agreeing with this viewpoint, said the group fully respected the autonomous responsibility of the Secretary-General for the structure and functioning of the Secretariat and believed that the objective of reform should be to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of information activities, rather than just cutting costs. One delegation, speaking on behalf of a group, said it supported the Secretary-General's goal of ensuring that the United Nations message was delivered with more vigour and purpose and to greater effect and to this end agreed with his reform efforts. He said also that there was a need for a flexible approach from Member States to allow the Department of Public Information to carry out its multiple mandates. A number of delegations said that they looked forward to the detailed blueprint of the new United Nations communications strategy and one expressed disappointment that the Secretary-General's report did not contain more details on the reorientation plan. One delegation said that only by making communications and information a cross-cutting issue in all its programmes and activities could the United Nations effectively realize its long-cherished objective of globally spreading its message of peace, justice and development.

12. As to specific public information activities, many delegations agreed that the Department of Public Information's priorities for 1998 should be to inform the public on: the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the United Nations Diplomatic Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Establishment of an International Criminal Court; the fiftieth anniversary of United Nations peacekeeping; and the special session of the General Assembly on the world drug problem, as outlined in the Secretary-General's report. One delegation, speaking on behalf of a group, looked forward to an information programme supporting the special session on small island developing States scheduled for 1999. A number of speakers expressed support for the Department's programme for Palestine and for its continuance, and several called for more information on decolonization. One delegation welcomed the recent publicity given by the Department of Public Information to the report of the Secretary-General on Africa. Another speaker proposed that the Department of Public Information consider publicizing the problem of the former Soviet nuclear test site near Semipalatinsk in her country. A number of delegations, stressing the magnitude and increasing negative impact of the Chernobyl disaster, encouraged the Department, in cooperation with other relevant bodies of the United Nations system, to continue to strengthen their efforts to enhance world public awareness of the consequences of that

catastrophe. Several delegations said that the Department of Public Information should strengthen its activities to highlight socio-economic problems facing the countries in transition. This, in the view of one speaker, could contribute to generating assistance on the part of the international community in implementing democratic and economic transformations in those countries. A number of speakers pointed to the importance of the information components as an integral part of all peacekeeping and other field operations. In their view, it was of critical importance that the people of the host country were adequately informed of the mandates and goals of these missions.

13. Most speakers were supportive of the views expressed in the Secretary-General's report on the importance of forming partnerships with information redisseminators, in the belief that such links were absolutely essential to reach the people of the world. At the same time, several delegations cautioned that, while the cooperation of non-governmental organizations was very much appreciated in carrying out the work of the United Nations, no measures should be taken that would "undermine" the Organization as an intergovernmental body. Several other delegations said that it was useful for the Department of Public Information to have contacts with the media and civil society, but that, at the same time, "the responsibility of the Department of Public Information to serve the Member States" was paramount. On the other hand, many speakers emphasized that the United Nations must continue to build enduring partnerships with non-governmental organizations, the media, educational institutions and other representatives of civil society. In the belief that youth should be the focus of information programmes, one delegation agreed that the Department of Public Information's outreach to educational institutions was important. Another was supportive of the Department's programmes for young people with programmes such as the CyberSchoolBus. Some speakers noted with appreciation that the Secretary-General intended to strengthen the working arrangements among the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the Department of Political Affairs, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the Department of Public Information.

14. All delegations praised the important work of the United Nations information centres in taking the message of the Organization to the national and regional levels where public opinion was created. Many believed them to be a key component of United Nations outreach, especially for developing countries and countries in transition. One speaker said that the information centres did a good job of maintaining strategic contacts with influential audiences and were thus a very important part of the information strategy of the United Nations. It was noted by several delegations that the role of the centres differed depending upon the specific needs of the country in which they were located. A number of delegations expressed their concern about the cutting back of resources to the centres and were of the view that sufficient funding must be provided to allow them to perform their functions, in particular those located in countries where local media were less developed. Another delegation said that it was important that national information officers in the field should be trained to use the new technologies.

15. In regard to the process of integrating information centres with field offices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), many speakers agreed this should be done on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration the views of the host country, with the understanding that the information functions and the autonomy of the centres would not be adversely affected. One speaker, addressing the Committee on behalf of a large group, was concerned about the problems being encountered with the integration of information centres, and a number of others voiced the same concern. One delegation expressed its support for the Secretary-General's intention to establish a single "United Nations house" in each country, and another, with the same point of view, urged that the Department of Public Information continue, wherever possible, to integrate United Nations information centres under one flag. Several speakers stated that integration was not effectively serving the greater interest of the United Nations and its public information responsibilities, and one asked for a review of the integration exercise, taking into account experience in the field.

16. Many delegations spoke of the success stories of information centres in their countries. One delegation referred to the vital role that the United Nations Information Centre in Tokyo played in enhancing public understanding of United Nations activities in Japan. Another highlighted the information work of the University for Peace in Costa Rica and expressed appreciation to the Committee for its support for the institution. One delegation said that excellent cooperation existed between the United Nations information centre in Tehran and various governmental and non-governmental bodies in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Another delegation said that its Government highly valued the activities of the information component in the United Nations office in Minsk, and another speaker praised the activities of the United Nations information centre in Accra.

17. One delegation said that there should be a flexible country-level model for information centres and, as to the unified regional centres, it believed there was a need for a careful approach, based on a range of factors. Another said

that the proposal for establishing regional hubs should not be implemented through elimination of or reduction in resources of effectively functioning centres and information components in the field. One delegation urged the Secretary-General to accord high priority to requests by Member States to open centres in their capitals. Another reiterated its call for an information centre in Port-au-Prince and one delegation, speaking on behalf of a group, reiterated the request for an information officer for the multi-island office of UNDP in Kingston.

18. All speakers agreed with the Secretary-General's strong emphasis in his report on the potential of new technologies to expand the dissemination capabilities of the United Nations. All were unanimous in the belief that the Internet had opened important new avenues of communications for the Organization and praised the bold steps being taken by the Department of Public Information in effectively entering cyberspace, especially through the Internet, the so-called fourth medium. Many delegations praised the Department's work in providing excellent electronic services, which were widely used every day, and pointed to its efforts in maintaining and enriching the United Nations home page on the World Wide Web. In order to bring electronic information to developed and developing countries alike, several delegations urged the Department of Public Information to work to expand the electronic availability of United Nations information in all six languages. One delegation referred to the need to clear cyberspace and satellite broadcasting of violent and "immoral" materials.

19. Two delegations noted that all 185 permanent missions were now connected to the United Nations website and other United Nations databases. A number of speakers commended the use of information technology by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library. One said the work of the Library merited attention and needed to be developed and supported in every way. Another speaker thanked the staff of the Library for their "innovative role" in disseminating very helpful information via electronic mail and welcomed the "positive development" that, as a result of the Department's initiative, permanent missions now had the opportunity to enjoy equal access to electronic data. Several speakers were of the view that the work of the Committee on Information and the Economic and Social Council's Working Group on Informatics should be complementary in promoting the use of modern information technology for the benefit of the United Nations and its Member States. It was observed by one delegation that the United Nations did not have an Organization-wide mechanism for technology planning and budgeting and, in this regard, expressed appreciation for what he considered to be the Department's "voluntary efforts" on the United Nations home page. He called for "greater focus and attention and reallocated resources" to be devoted in this area.

20. While clearly appreciating the reach and scope of electronic communications, a majority of speakers stated that the Department of Public Information should maintain its outreach through the traditional media, which was of particular importance to the people of the developing countries. In this connection, they appreciated the Department's continuing efforts to strengthen United Nations Radio. Another suggested that Member States should be informed of "who exactly were the recipients" of United Nations radio programmes and on what frequency they received them. Several delegations pointed to the good work of the Caribbean Radio Unit and supported full programming in French and in Creole for Haiti, a long-standing mandate, calling for a report on that matter. One delegation referred to the Department's "New Contacts" radio programme and said that it was becoming more useful to his country's media. Another speaker said that Spanish language stations should receive radio programmes through the Internet. Several delegations drew attention to the need for increased United Nations Radio broadcasting in Russian, as well as for publications in that language. One speaker pointed to the agreements that his country and other Portuguese-speaking countries had made with United Nations Radio to distribute information in that language.

21. A number of speakers supported the feasibility study on a United Nations international radio broadcasting capacity currently being conducted and looked forward to receiving its results. One delegation regretted, however, that the Committee had not played a part in the preparation of the study. Many were of the view that the Department of Public Information should make strong efforts to develop such a capacity as a priority, although one delegation said that it must be compatible with the interests of developing countries. On the other hand, several delegations were not certain that direct radio broadcasting by the United Nations on a global level was warranted. One delegation urged that the Department of Public Information consider the possibility of further exploiting existing international media networks in order to avoid competing with them. Another was very supportive of United Nations international radio capacity, in the belief that it would greatly benefit the peoples of the small-island developing countries, and further justified such an initiative as a means of telling the United Nations story daily to worldwide audiences, as well as to help narrow the information gap. One speaker said that the

medium of television needed more attention from the Department.

22. One delegation protested the "violation of its national sovereignty by radio and television transmissions from another country", which were directed specifically against it for "subversive goals".

23. One speaker called for general strengthening of United Nations publications, while another called for further streamlining of the Department's active publications programme since a "cost-based, consumer-driven process" was vital at this time. On the subject of linguistic diversity, one delegation said that information in English was of "extremely limited usefulness" for its people, and therefore called for the issuance of publications and radio programmes in all official languages, particularly Russian. Several delegations agreed with this point of view and stressed the importance of the Russian language to the citizens of the Commonwealth of Independent States countries. One speaker said that print and audio-visual materials, as well as electronic products in Chinese, were "still far from enough". On this same subject, one delegation asked that the Department of Public Information "diversify its linguistic programmes" to include Farsi. Several delegations called for more products in Arabic.

24. As to the Department's relations with the press, one speaker said that the Office of the Spokesman for the Secretary-General expertly provided complete and timely information to the media and another expressed its appreciation for the Department's services to correspondents. One speaker said that the Department should give priority to providing delegations with press releases. The representative of the accredited press corps at Headquarters said that the current Secretary-General had been very accessible in his dealings with the media. He appealed for even-handedness in dealing with the press. A number of speakers expressed their support for training programmes for information professionals from the developing countries and appreciated the progress made by the Department of Public Information in training broadcasters and journalists from these countries.

25. One delegation praised the important work of the Department of Public Information's Visitors' Service and expressed special appreciation to the tour guides. He hoped that the limits on tour group size could be relaxed in the interest of added productivity.

26. At the end of the general debate, the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information made a statement responding to some of the questions raised by delegations.

27. The Committee then took up item 7 of its agenda, and a debate on procedures for negotiations ensued. One group maintained that negotiations should take place in the Bureau of the Committee, together with the representatives of the regional groups and the Group of 77 and China. A large group maintained that the Committee needed more transparent procedures and that negotiations should take place in an open-ended working group. At the end of the discussion, the Chairman said he would initiate consultations on an informal basis to consider the draft resolutions and invited all interested delegations to attend these consultations to begin the next morning. The Committee proceeded to adopt this latter course of action.